

Eric Silver on the workings of one of the world's most successful spy systems : Jerusalem, Sunday

Cloaks and daggers in the desert

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Eichmann trial, there was a change in the world about war criminals. In Western Germany, for example, in the first year or two after the Eichmann case there were more war crime trials than in the whole period from 1945 to 1961. So after Eichmann it would have been much easier to do it another way, in coordination and cooperation with other Governments, including Western Germany."

Secret services must break the law abroad, in exceptional circumstances on a grand Eichmann scale, but more frequently in trivial ways like adopting a false name and nationality. Harel is adamant, however, that you should not do such things in your own country, even when you have a minority population like the Arabs who might be infiltrated by enemy guerrillas.

Bar-Zohar's book cites a number of cases where Israel recruited foreign Jews for their linguistic skill, their appearance, and their passports. Was not this playing into the hands of anti-Semites, raising the spectre of dual loyalty?

Harel claims to have recruited fewer Jews than other intelligence services did. "I preferred to work with people of other nations, sometime without their knowing that they were working for Israel. I worked with Germans, some even anti-Israel and pro-Nazi, in this way." (The book describes two operations in Egypt where German agents thought they were working for the West against the Russians, whereas their ultimate masters were actually the Israelis.)

The use of Egyptian Jews as agents was one reason, Harel says, for the failure of the 1954 avon adventure. The other was the sheer misjudgment of the Egyptian revolution. Neither Harel nor the Prime Minister of the day, Moshe Sharett, knew anything of the operation, according to the former security chief. If they had known, they would have

Iser Harel

ISER HAREL is a short, bunched man with the angular features of a medieval carving. His modern bungalow — rich, green garden, Danish teak panels, and glass-topped tables — would raise no eyebrows in Westerham or Wilmslow. In Tel-Aviv it probably counts a luxury.

Three days a week Harel leaves his retired officers' suburb and goes to Jerusalem, where he is an Opposition M.P. with no political future and a reputation for making enemies. Yet for 15 years from 1948 Iser Harel was one of the least identifiable and more important men in the land.

The story of how he created and directed the Israeli secret services is told in tantalising half detail by Michael Bar-Zohar, whose "Spies in the Promised Land" is published in London by Davis-Poynter at £3. "These," says Harel, "are the ones we talk about. The public successes and the public failures. There were others."

Bar-Zohar ranges from the early Haganah days, when Harel still had to make his mark, to his resignation in 1963, when he differed bitterly with Ben-Gurion over what Israel should do about the German scientists recruited for weird and wondrous rocketry by Nasser.

Cloak-and-dagger history is narrated with relish: the war against Israel's own fanatics, sacred and profane; espionage in Cairo and Baghdad; the Israeli tip that saved de Gaulle from an officers' plot in Algeria; the monumental fiasco of the Lavon affair, when the Israeli Minister of Defence tried to keep Britain in the Canal zone by having bombs planted in British and American property in Egypt.

Allen Dulles, the late director of the American Central Intelligence Agency, once praised the Israeli security department as "among the world's best." Reinhard Gehlen, master spy to both Hitler and Adenauer, has said as much again in his recent memoirs. Yet a quarter of a century ago it did not even exist. Israel had to establish its security services during the war of independence. The Jewish population was mingled with Arabs, the British were still in the wings. Intelligence was needed urgently.

"We had no experience in this field," Harel says now. "Being in a state of war with the British they wouldn't let Jewish people be involved in this kind of trade too much. And it was one of those secrets other nations would not let you know."

Because it was a new service, Harel could choose the people he wanted. "Our doctrine was volunteering. We didn't want career people,

We didn't want adventurers. The principles were not to make a closed sect of people who want to gain personal advantage. We called people to do their duty, and they answered positively.

"It was very important to have people you could prepare so that with time they would change their jobs. Otherwise you get stagnation and some deterioration of people in such an organisation. In intelligence work there are many risky things to do, risky from the moral point of view. You teach people to do certain things which you wouldn't want them to do in their private lives. It shouldn't become second nature."

Harel's operatives broke the law when they had to, but he opposed torture on strict grounds. "It belongs to the morals of your nation."

But morality is not just a matter of torture or seduction. Iser Harel was the man who brought Adolf Eichmann to Israel from Argentina. What about the ethics of abducting a man in one country and spiriting him away for trial in another in disregard of all legal formalities? Did Harel have any qualms about this?

"Of course, I didn't do it with much enthusiasm. I was aware of these things you mention. I wasn't happy, but the extermination of six million Jews wasn't a regular thing. So dealing with Nazi criminals shouldn't demand the usual way of reasoning. The extermination of the Jews was out of any regulation, any legality. Only in this context did we do this operation. There wasn't any hope of bringing this monster to trial — in Germany or Argentina or anywhere else in the world — unless we got hold of him."

Let us assume, then, that Harel is still head of the Israeli secret service and receives good information about the survival and whereabouts of, say, Martin Bormann, Hitler's deputy. Would he mount a similar operation and bring him to Israel for trial?

"I don't think I would. The importance of Eichmann was that he was responsible, specially and personally, for the extermination of six million Jews. Also, after the

There have been other failures, other lessons for Israel's improvised secret service. In the end, Harel is philosophic. "If you send people outside your country and give them a false cover to collect intelligence — and the other side is very sensitive — it is a natural thing that one day some of them will be caught. Only James